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The Likelihood of a Major North  
Vietnamese Offensive Against South  
Vietnam Before June 30, 1975

23 May 1974

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# NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

**The Likelihood of a Major North Vietnamese  
Offensive Against South Vietnam  
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No 260

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## THE LIKELIHOOD OF A MAJOR NORTH VIETNAMESE OFFENSIVE AGAINST SOUTH VIETNAM BEFORE JUNE 30, 1975

### PRÉCIS

A major Communist offensive in South Vietnam is unlikely during 1974. The picture for the first half of 1975, however, is less clear, and there obviously is a substantial risk that Hanoi will opt for a major offensive during this period. But our best judgment now is that Hanoi will not do so.<sup>1</sup>

If unforeseen and dramatic new developments occurred, the Communists could easily shift course to take advantage of them.

- They have the capability to launch an offensive with little warning.
- We expect the North Vietnamese to reassess their situation this summer or fall.

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<sup>1</sup>The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, believes that the "best judgment" expressed in this paragraph is unduly optimistic. He believes that the chances are at least even that North Vietnam will undertake a major offensive during the first half of 1975. For his reasoning see the footnote to paragraph 15 on page 8.

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, and the Assistant General Manager for National Security, Atomic Energy Commission, share this view.

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- Changes both in South Vietnam and in the international situation, particularly in the US, will weigh heavily in their calculations.
- The North Vietnamese would also consider the views of the Soviet Union and China, but the influence of Moscow and Peking on any reassessment in Hanoi would not be decisive.

Should a major offensive occur, the Communists could retake Quang Tri City, and perhaps capture Hue in MR 1, Kontum and Pleiku cities in MR 2 and Tay Ninh City in MR 3. If the Communists persisted in their offensive, this initial situation would probably be followed by a period of inconclusive fighting and, over time, further GVN losses. ARVN might be unable to regain the initiative, and it would be questionable whether the GVN would be able to survive without combat participation by US Air Force and Navy units. At a minimum, large-scale US logistic support would be required to stop the Communist drive.

Even if there is not a major offensive during the next year, current Communist strategy does call for some increase in the tempo of the conflict.

Furthermore, it is clear that at some point Hanoi will shift back to major warfare.

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## DISCUSSION

1. Hanoi continues to demonstrate its determination to impose Communist control on the South. The North Vietnamese leadership, however, presently views the task of achieving victory in the South as "complex," "difficult," and "protracted." In this sense, Hanoi is faced with a continuing dilemma. The Communist position in South Vietnam is not perceptibly improving. Even if the GVN's economy deteriorated markedly or US aid were curtailed, the Communists would still not be able to topple the GVN without major military action. Sharply increasing Communist military pressure, on the other hand, would involve a considerable gamble. Should South Vietnam successfully weather a Communist offensive, the GVN's position would be further strengthened. But should the North Vietnamese repeatedly postpone a decision in favor of major military action, they would run the risk of having the GVN's strength evolve to a point where they could not topple it.

### The Military Balance<sup>2</sup>

2. North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam are now stronger than they were at the time of the cease-fire:

- Hanoi is pressing ahead with its military modernization and improvement programs.
- The NVA/VC have more men, armor, artillery, and air defense weapons in South Vietnam than they did when the cease-fire went into effect.
- The Communists already have on hand sufficient materiel to support offensive operations at the 1972 level for well over a year. An improved logistics and personnel infiltration system permits year-round deliveries to South Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> The military balance and the outcome of various offensive scenarios are treated in detail in an Inter-agency Memorandum entitled *South Vietnam: A Net Military Assessment*, SC 01984/74, dated 2 April 1974.

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- There are an additional six infantry divisions in reserve in North Vietnam which could be rapidly deployed to South Vietnam.
  - Communist forces have improved with the infiltration of personnel and the institution of remedial training programs to overcome shortcomings that emerged during the fighting in 1972.
  - The Communists now have wider military options during the period June to September than previously. (This is the rainy season in most of the country.) But the recent improvements in Communist capabilities do not fully alleviate the problems the NVA have traditionally encountered in operating during the wet season.
3. The South Vietnamese have also strengthened their force structure:
- South Vietnam maintains about twice as many combat troops under arms as the Communists have deployed in the South.
  - The South Vietnamese received sufficient material before the cease-fire—most importantly aircraft, armor and artillery—to assure that even now they retain a country-wide edge in firepower assets.
  - In the 16 months since the cease-fire, the South Vietnamese logistic command moved from almost total dependence on the US to a position where it is now able to do a creditable job.
4. In the event of a major Communist offensive, the outcome would depend on the availability of US support for South Vietnam:
- If the Communists committed a substantial portion of their six-division strategic reserve and built up replacement manpower pools in the southern part of South Vietnam:
    - They could retake Quang Tri City, perhaps capture Hue, and make sizable gains in southern MR 1.
    - In western MR 2, Kontum and Pleiku cities might also fall, and some gains, possibly including the fall of Tay Ninh City, would accrue to the Communists north and northwest of Saigon in MR 3.
  - If the Communists persisted in their offensive, this initial situation would probably be followed by a period of inconclusive fighting and, over time, further GVN losses. ARVN might be unable to regain the initiative, and it would be questionable whether the GVN would be able to survive without combat participation by US Air Force and Navy units.
  - At a minimum, large-scale US logistic support would be required to stop the Communist drive.
- The Political Balance**
5. Politically, the GVN is stronger than the Communists . . .
- The GVN has a generally effective governmental structure extending down to villages and hamlets. Its police and military presence in most populated areas severely limits Communist activities. President Thieu retains the backing of the army and the acceptance of most South Vietnamese; he has successfully isolated or out-maneuvered most of the non-Communist opposition.
  - The Communists are not optimistic that they can extract major concessions from Thieu for the foreseeable future or that there is an early prospect for a coalition government through a "Third Force."

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- Hanoi has recognized that Communist political stagnation is its most serious weakness and has instructed its southern cadre to make a maximum effort to rebuild the infrastructure and undermine the GVN. Under present circumstances, however, Communist proselyting cannot achieve quick results through recruiting new cadre or penetrating the GVN. These efforts cannot seriously erode the government's present political position, nor is there any prospect that the current Communist strategy will topple the GVN.
- 6. . . . but the Communists are persisting in political efforts which they still believe may yield some dividends.
  - In some limited areas Communist terrorism is on the rise.
  - They are infiltrating civilians from the North into Communist enclaves.
  - They apparently hope their military presence in the South will add an aura of durability to the PRG.
- The Economic Balance
- 7. Both Saigon and Hanoi face major economic problems which leave them heavily dependent on continuing assistance from their respective allies:
  - North Vietnam—Although a number of critical sectors of the economy damaged by US bombing have now been restored, serious long-standing economic problem areas remain. These include inadequate food production, insufficient consumer goods, little industrial capacity, and consequently heavy dependence on foreign economic assistance.
  - Although there are some signs of strains in the North Vietnamese social system, there is no indication that the leadership faces any serious challenge to its control.
  - There has been no apparent curtailment in Hanoi's support for either the war or its present reconstruction efforts. Continued support for its current war effort in the South does not require significant diversion of economic resources from the North. Many of Hanoi's current economic targets, however, could not be achieved even in peaceful conditions.
  - South Vietnam—The South Vietnamese economy has been in a serious slump for two years, and the outlook is for more of the same and possibly a worsening of the situation. Rapid inflation (67 percent in 1973), unemployment (between 15 and 20 percent), and a threat of declining agricultural output are major problems.
  - These problems are basically the result of dislocation caused by continuing warfare in South Vietnam, increasing prices of critical imports, and declining real amounts of US assistance.
  - Thus far the resilience of the South Vietnamese people as well as the protection afforded by the extended family system have prevented economic dislocation from generating political instability. But these factors of themselves do not increase the GVN's stability—they simply attenuate the negative impact of adverse economic conditions.
  - Assuming continued US assistance at present levels, economic problems will not prove decisive over the next year.
  - Over the longer run, however, continued economic deterioration would be likely to produce increasing corruption, possibly urban disorders, and declining GVN administrative and military effectiveness.

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### The Shape of Things to Come

8. Certain general considerations will affect Communist behavior:

- A) Hanoi continues to see the cease-fire agreement and subsequent developments as offering some benefits which it would not jeopardize lightly:
  - Militarily, the agreement, produced a US withdrawal which allowed the Communists to enhance their military capabilities in South Vietnam.
  - Politically, the agreement added a degree of international respectability and legitimacy to the PRG and provided a basis for Communist insistence on being consulted about future political arrangements in Saigon.
- B) The international environment continues to place certain constraints on Hanoi:
  - The North Vietnamese leaders are still concerned that the US might recommit its air power if the GVN were confronted by a massive Communist military challenge.
  - Hanoi cannot have full confidence in the reliability of its allies, the USSR and the PRC, as long as they remain committed to a policy of detente with the US.
- C) Economic considerations also place some constraints on Hanoi:
  - With continued assistance from the USSR and China, North Vietnam should be able both to step up its military action in the South and make economic progress in the North. A major increase in the level of hostilities, however, would run the risk that Moscow and Peking might reduce their assistance.
  - A major offensive—while not of itself sufficient to derail Hanoi's current economic programs—would complicate the implementation of future large-scale development efforts.
- D) The situation on the ground in South Vietnam cuts both ways. The Communists do not seem to be urgently preparing for a major offensive, but the very magnitude of the current Communist military presence in the South increases the danger of large-scale fighting:
  - Hanoi's leaders apparently do not think that they now can take control in the South in one swift campaign. Communist ideology and experience have conditioned them to think in terms of stages.
  - The Communists confront a major problem in achieving the proper mix of military and political initiatives. Given their weak political position in South Vietnam, they cannot decrease military pressure on the GVN without losing momentum. They doubt that they can significantly improve their political position without successful military action on an expanding scale against government-controlled areas of South Vietnam. On the other hand, the extension of military action would be difficult in areas where the Communist infrastructure did not provide a base for supporting such action.
  - Some infiltration of men and supplies and the development of some roads and base areas over the past year has been necessary to hold territory and to support the current Communist political-military strategy.
  - The Communists are, however, now equipped to move more quickly than ever before; troops can come down from the North rapidly and with very lit-

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the attrition, and the movement and prepositioning of supplies is no longer the gradual process it once was.

- On balance, the Communists do not appear to be under any immediate compulsion to go for broke; however, they would not be making such massive logistic preparations, keeping—and supporting—so many troops in the South, and moving in so many more, if they were not still seriously contemplating large-unit warfare.

#### Hanoi's Intentions Through June 1975

9. Available evidence now indicates that North Vietnamese leaders tentatively decided in late 1973 on a period of military, political, and economic buildup which would last well into 1975.

- The most recent COSVN instructions, which reflect decisions on the conduct of the war made at the secret 21st plenum of the Lao Dong Party in the fall of 1973, emphasize the need for a continuing military buildup in the South and a considerable period of infrastructure rebuilding. They call for a strengthening of Communist-held "liberated" areas, expanding into contested areas, and propaganda, terrorism, sabotage and subversion in government-controlled areas. A number of cadre have interpreted these instructions as applicable to the years 1974 and 1975.
- According to decisions a few months later, at the well publicized 22nd Lao Dong plenum, North Vietnamese leaders in early 1974 established guidelines for a substantial economic reconstruction program of the North in 1974 and 1975. At least one senior North Vietnamese official has publicly cautioned that Hanoi should not pay so much attention to strengthening the Commu-

nist position in the South lest the Northern reconstruction effort would be jeopardized.

- The current Communist military posture, including the measured pace of conscription and infiltration, current retraining of Communist forces, the withdrawal of some main force divisions and AAA units, does not reflect the kind of urgency that previously has preceded military escalation. There is also a marked absence in South Vietnam of tactical deployments and cadre briefings, and in North Vietnam, of mobilizations and civil defense measures. Given the advanced state of Communist military preparedness, however, it must be recognized that such indicators may provide very little warning of a new offensive.

10. In any event, the current Communist strategy calls for an increase this year in the tempo of the conflict:

- Hanoi plans to test its military prowess and probe for weaknesses in the GVN's position.
  - Main Force units are to be committed more frequently.
  - Operations to expand "liberated" areas and Communist LOCs are to increase.
  - Such action could intensify without either side actually planning for it. The Communists are bent on expanding their control and the GVN is determined to keep Communist forces bottled up in their present enclaves. Should favorable conditions develop, either side might further expand its military effort to exploit the situation.
- Hanoi may want to gauge the reactions of its major Communist allies and, more important, of the US.

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11. At some point this summer or fall, we expect the North Vietnamese to reassess their strategy and initiate planning for the next stage.

— Communist officials have told their cadre in the South that they should be ready for "new developments" if the situation changes in South Vietnam or internationally. Cadre have been exhorted not to become confused if Hanoi switches to a new policy line.

12. In such a reassessment, several factors may influence Hanoi to reaffirm its policy against a major escalation.

— Hanoi may continue to see such escalation as too risky as long as it cannot count on certain victory.

— The North Vietnamese may continue to believe that any major military escalation risks a recommitment of US air support.

— Hanoi may question Soviet and Chinese willingness to support a major and prolonged military offensive.

— Hanoi may see economic deterioration in the South as in itself ultimately undermining the South Vietnamese political and social structure, and therefore believe large-scale military action to be unnecessary.

13. At the same time there are factors which may influence Hanoi toward a major escalation.

— Hanoi may decide its current strategy is costly and not working well.

— Increased RVNAF pressure, either in retaliation against Communist attacks or to forestall expected Communist initiatives, could result in erosion of important Communist base areas in the South.

— A breakdown in detente, or other international developments, could produce Soviet or Chinese encouragement for a North Vietnamese military escalation.

— Similarly, a determination that US options were seriously curtailed by domestic political developments could encourage Hanoi to escalate.

### Conclusions

14. In sum, we do not believe that the Communists will undertake a major offensive this year.

15. Hanoi, however, will be reassessing its strategy as time passes, and the picture for the first half of 1975 is less clear. Changes since last fall in South Vietnam and in the international situation, particularly in the US, will weigh heavily in Hanoi's calculations, and there obviously is a substantial risk that Hanoi will opt for a major offensive. But our best judgment now is that Hanoi will not decide to do so during the first half of 1975.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, believes that the "best judgment" expressed in this paragraph is unduly optimistic. While agreeing with the judgment in paragraph 14—i.e., that the Communists are unlikely to undertake a major offensive through the balance of 1974—he also notes that most of the supporting evidence is essentially short term in nature, and there is now no direct evidence of Hanoi's intentions for the first half of 1975. Nevertheless, North Vietnam has not only assiduously maintained its major offensive option in South Vietnam, but major sections of the Estimate make a persuasive case that Hanoi can and will readily abandon its present strategy of localized military action in the South. Expanding Communist military capabilities, coupled with Hanoi's inability to make much progress in South Vietnam under current circumstances, increase the danger of a major North Vietnamese offensive. The Director, DIA, believes that the chances are at least even that North Vietnam will undertake such action during the first half of 1975.

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, and the Assistant General Manager for National Security, Atomic Energy Commission, share this view.

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16. Nevertheless, the Communists do have the capability to launch a major offensive with little warning whenever they so choose. In the event of an unforeseen and dramatic change in the situation, the Communists could easily move militarily to take advantage of a target

of opportunity. Finally, even if there is not a major offensive during the next year, it is clear that at some point Hanoi will shift back to major warfare in its effort to gain control of South Vietnam.

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